# Where do social relations come from ?

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*Communication to the Sunbelt XXIII, Cancün, Mexico*

# Where do social relations come from ?
## A survey of personal networks in Toulouse's region (France)

## Abstract

Where do personal relations come from ?

I will answer this question by using the results of a survey on personal networks that we made in Toulouse, in 2001. This survey uses the same name generators than Fischer in his study of personal networks in San Francisco (1982). 399 interviewed persons (from different urban contexts of Toulouse's area and a rural county) cited 10932 persons who they are related to. For a sub-sample of the cited persons (1624), we asked for the first context of meeting and I will compare it with the way that interviewed persons name the relation at the time of the survey. Il will also analyse the duration of the relations and their end, using the answers to a question about ended relations (persons that people used to see 2 years before the survey and that they dont't see anymore).

As previous studies of personal networks did, this survey show that, most of the times, social ties begin within collective contexts as family, school, firms, etc. Thus, personal relations depend on these collective contexts. Whatever word is used to name them (social circles, groups, organizations, clusters, etc.) these collective entities cannot be reduced to a network. Social actors can refer to them in their interactions, they can feel (and declare) themselves as members of them, they can have a notion of their boundaries. Collective entities contribute to frame interactions. For a part, social ties are embedded in these collective contexts, until they get independent of it, that is to say until they decouple from it. In this communication I will consider embedding and decoupling as interactive processes between the level of collective entities and the level of individuals. If collective contexts are the main context of relations contruction, the results of the study show two other kinds of contexts : the first one is the growing of the network by itself (people meet through existing personal relations) and the second one is the connection by common stakes (like in the relations with neighbours).

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International Network for Social Network Analysis is not a social network.

A social network is not supposed to have a name, persons don't have to pay to be part of it, it has no members, no internal rules and no meetings.

INSNA can certainly be analysed as a network, like in intra-organizational networks studies, but it is not only a network. It's something like what Nicolas Mullins called a "cluster" in his study of scientific specialties : "A cluster forms when scientists become self-conscious about their patterns of communication and begin to set boundaries around those who are working on their common problem. It develops from recombinaisons of pairs and triads in response to certain favourable conditions, *e.g.*, luck, leadership, a substantial problem for research, a supporting institution or institutions. These clusters are often identified by name by those inside and outside the cluster, are more stable than the pairs and triads which constitute them, have a distinct culture and are able to draw support and students." (Mullins, 1972, pp.69-70).
In his study, Mullins define the "cluster" stage as following the "communication network" stage in the development of a specialty. What are the differences between a "cluster" and a network ? According to Mullins : self-consciousness, boundaries, name, distinct culture. A cluster is an actor.

The same kind of characteristics could be used to define an organisation, a family and different kinds of collective entities. These entities are more than networks. We could call them "clusters", "groups" or "circles" (Degenne and Forse, 1994). If we do that, we consider that social networks are not the only kind of social structure and that dyadic relations interact

with other kinds of structures like these "clusters" or "circles" (I will use "circle" from that point).
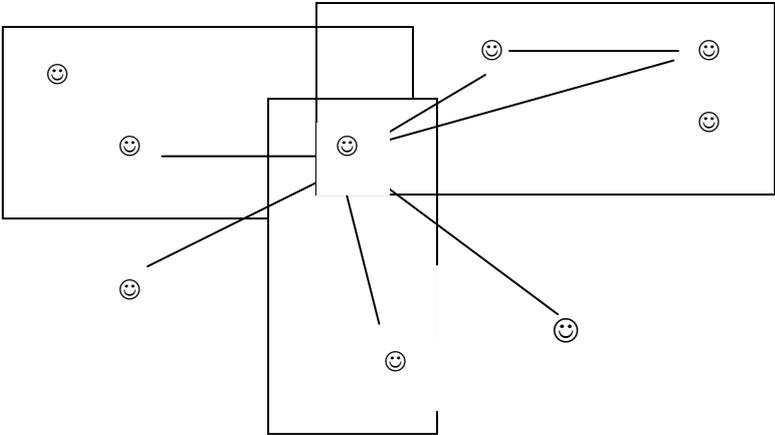
**Figure 1 : networks and circles**

In the Mullins' model of scientific specialties development, a cluster emerge from a network when some persons become self-conscious of their patterns of communication, when they become self-conscious that they could constitute something collective. In that model, Mullins starts with persons (the paradigm group), creating relations and network and then becoming a cluster and then a specialty. This model could certainly apply to other kinds of circles : new firms, new organizations, etc.

Name

Boundaries

Network                                  Cluster
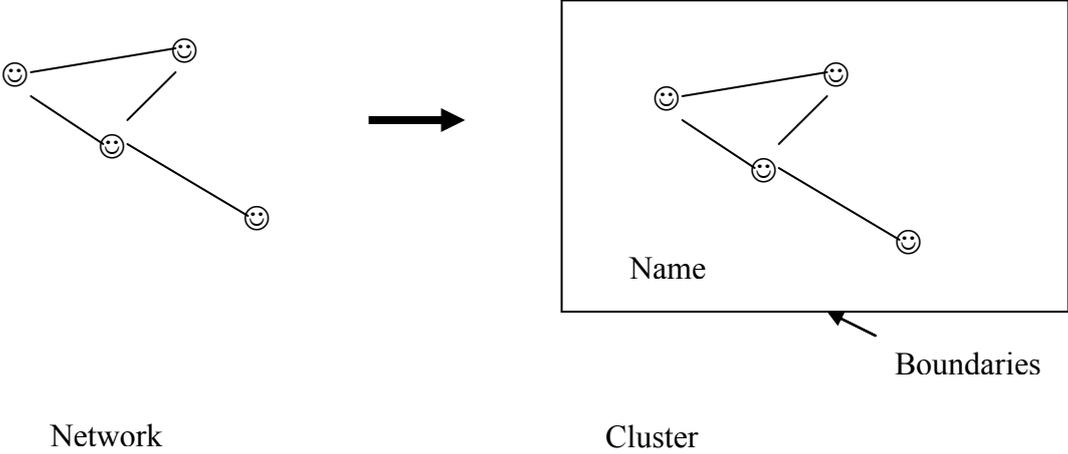
**Figure 2 : Mullins Model for scientific specialties development**

In that case, personal relations come from a common scientific interest that scholars can spot by reading scientific journals. There is a common stake (the scientific problem) and a system of communication specific to the scientific community allowing scholars the capability to know who is interested in the same kind of problems.

But more generally where do the ordinary social relations come from ? How did they begin ? How people met at the beginning ?

My aim in this paper is to answer these questions by using a theoretical framework considering several kinds of social structures, at least two : networks and circles.

I will start with a typology of relations construction contexts involving or not circles. This typology is built on the basis of the works of Fischer (1982) and other scholars. I used it in a study of personal networks in Toulouse (in 2001), that makes a transposition of a method designed by Claude Fischer in his study of personal networks in the region of San Francisco. This method uses 9 names générators (questions about exchange of services, about common activities, etc.). In that kind of classic research on personal relations, circles are not directly studied, but we can find some indirect information on them in the ecvolution of relations.

## 1. Where do social relations come from ?

Everytime authors try to answer this question they find families, organizations, groups and other collective entities. Claude S. Fischer who directed an important personal networks survey in the end of the seventies years put it very clearly : "Most adults encounter people through their families, at work, in the neighbourhood, in organizations, or through introduction by friends or relatives ; they continue to know some people met in earlier settings, such as school or the army ; only rarely do chance meetings, in a bar, at an auction, or such, becom anything than brief encounters." (Fischer, 1982, p.4). In a more recent book about friendship in France, Claire Bidart wrote something similar : "We don't find our friends in the street, in the crowd, from nothing. Some frameworks, some places, some milieux can relatively favorize the construction of interpersonal links, althrough other ones make it difficult." (1997, p.52).

Let's examine the contexts analysed by Fischer.

A **family** has names, boundaries, collective references. It can be considered as a circle.

**Work, organizations, school, army** : they are organizations as collective entities having internal rules, names, boundaries, etc. They are also circles.

**Neighbourhood** is not an organization. Neither it is a network. It's a set of stakes and people connected by it.

**Persons met through introduction by friends or relatives** : a social network grow by itself.

When we have met persons in these different contexts, we can construct a relation that become autonomous from them : "The initial relations are given to us — parents and close kin — and often other relations are imposed upon us — workmates, in-laws, and so on. But over time we become responsible ; we decide whose company to pursue, whom to ignore or to leave as casual acquaintances, whom to neglect or break away from. Even relations with kin become a matter of choice ; some people are intimate with and some people are estranged from their parents or siblings. By adulthood, people have *chosen* their networks. " (Fischer, 1982, p.4). We can summarize the contexts of relations construction in three kinds of structures :

1) relations derive from circles
A great part of personal relations (we will measure it more precisely) is created within circles :
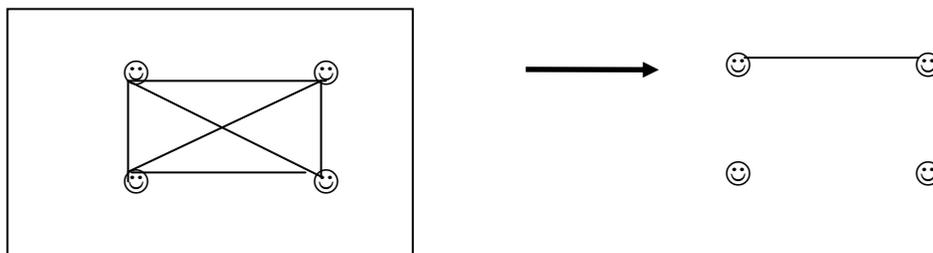


**Figure 3 : from circles to personal relations**

2) Relations come from stakes

Neighbourhood relations are complex : they are made of helping opportunities, of common stakes, of recurrent co-presence and possible interactions. We described neighbourhood mainly as a set of stakes (space, devices, services, etc.) that are more or less common to neighbours. It's a simplification but we consider that, generally, common stakes are the origin of interactions : if two neighbours have a common hedge for example, they have to decide who have to cut it and this lead to interactions. In a same building, some common spaces or services can lead to interactions about decisions that neighbours must make. One can generalize the neighbourhood context of relations construction to local stakes at the level of towns. People connect because they share some stakes. One can say that they connect because they have a common relation with some objects, but these common relation don't lead to interaction if the objects are not taken as stakes by the persons.
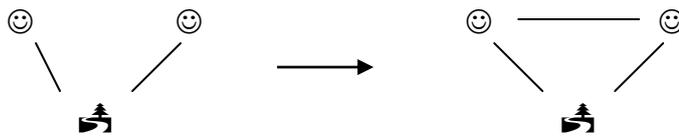


**Figure 4. From common stakes to relations**

3) relations come from other relations

Persons that we meet because they are introduced by friends or relatives can be considered most of the time as the growing of the network by itself. This kind of context cannot be "pure" : for example in-laws are part of a circle we enter in by having a couple relation. But it makes sense here to consider that previous relations are the context of the relation construction.
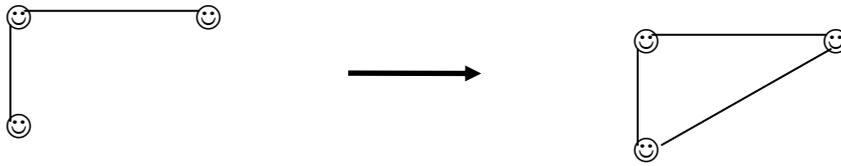
**Figure 5. From network to network**

How are these different context distributed in ordinary networks ? What part of the relations comes from a different origin ?

I will use here the first results of a survey that was made in Toulouse, in 2001, on 399 personal networks. This study used the same "name generators" (question asking for a list of names, like "if you go out of town for a while, who could you ask for taking care of your home, for example, to water the plants, pick up the mail, etc. ?") than Fischer. 399 interviewed persons cited 10932 persons who they are related to.

For a sub-sample of the cited persons (1624), we ask for the context of meeting.


## 2. The contexts of relations construction

During the tests of the survey form, we several times modified the categories and this is what we finally obtained :

**Table 1. Contexts of relations construction (Toulouse survey, 2001)**

| Meeting context | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Same family | 487 | 30,3 |
| | | |
| School | 79 | 4,9 |
| University | 79 | 4,9 |
| Work | 218 | 13,6 |
| Organizations | 90 | 5,6 |
| Organizations | 466 | 29 |
| | | |
| Total "circles" | 953 | 59,3 |
| | | |
| Neighbourhood | 123 | 7,7 |
| | | |
| Children friendship | 17 | 1,1 |
| Through  children | 110 | 6,8 |
| Through husband/wife | 100 | 6,2 |
| Through a friend | 202 | 12,6 |
| | | |
| Total Sociability ("through…") | 429 | 26,7 |
| | | |
| Other (chance, etc.) | 101 | 6,3 |
| | | |
| Total | 1606 | 100,0 |

Circles are the origin of almost 60% of the cited relations, sociability one quarter and neighbourhood arout 8%. Other contexts are very rare.

This results are very close to Fischer's (1982, p.356, footnote).

**Tableau 2. Meeting contexts and relations descriptions : comparison between two surveys**

| Decription of relations at the time of the survey | Meeting context | San Francisco survey 1977-1978 | Toulouse survey 2001[1] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family | « same family », « by way of the husband or wife », « by way of children » | 95% | 85% |
| Workmates | « at work » | 72% | 62% |
| | « by way of a friend » | 8% | 7% |
| Neighbours | « by the neighbourhood » | 74% | 71% |
| | « in a group or an association» | 8% | 3% |
| Associations members | « in a group or an association» | 51% | 50% |
| | « by way of a friend » | 14% | 15% |
| Friends | « by way of a friend » | 29% | 19% |
| | « at work » | 14% | 22% |
| | « school, studies » | 11% | 16% |

**The majority of the personal relations begin within a circle** (family, university, work, etc.) and become automous from it. Only family ties are stable. At the time of the survey, almost all cited persons that where met in the family are still considered by interviewed persons as members of the family. Persons that where met at school or university became husbands or wifes (a quarter), or friends and sometimes also co-workers. Only 44% of the cited persons that were met at work are still considered only as co-workers. Two third are considered as friends. They can also be husbands/wifes or members of the family, neighbours, etc. If we

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[1] In order to compare, I took off the relations concerning people living with the interviewed person (185 on 1624) that where not taken into account in the Fischer's study.

except in-laws met through husband or wife, persons that were met through a friend are still considered now as friend but they can also be co-workers, husband or wife, neighbours, etc.

"Family" and "friends" are something like attractors of the roles attached to the relations. The other qualifications often change to become family ties or friends, sometimes along with something else.

We asked interviewed persons to tell us the duration of the relations and we have calculated what wa their âge at its beginning. Even if I made big groups of ages, we can see the different phasis of relations construction and the duration of these relations.

**Table 3. Age at the time of the meeting by group of age of interviewed persons**

| age of cited persons | 18-25 years | 26-45 years | 46-65 years | more than 65 years | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0-15 years | 46,8% | 29,3% | 27,0% | 19,0% | 30,2% |
| 16-18 years | 19,7% | 5,3% | 1,6% | 2,6% | 6,2% |
| 19-25 years | 33,5% | 26,5% | 10,1% | 7,8% | 21,6% |
| 26-35 years | | 31,2% | 21,3% | 14,4% | 22,6% |
| 36-45 years | | 7,7% | 26,8% | 11,8% | 11,6% |
| 46-55 years | | | 12,0% | 19,6% | 4,9% |
| 56-65 years | | | 1,1% | 15,7% | 1,9% |
| plus de 65 years | | | | 9,2% | ,9% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |

Relations from childhood (mainly family) are less important when interviewed persons are more than 25. This kind of relations are then stable and decline when people reach 65. Youth relations, very important until people are 25, are replaced after that point by relations from active life, that are still the most important after 65. There is a turn-over of the relations « stock » on the basis of a subset of old stable relations. This stock of old relations grows during the life with always a place to new relations (table 4).

**Table 4. Duration of relations and age of interviewed persons**

| age of interviewed persons  Duration of relations | 18-25 years | 26-45 years | 46-65 years | more than 65 years | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0-5 years | 68,1% | 33,6% | 16,2% | 14,2% | 31,9% |
| 6-10 years | 23,1% | 30,5% | 16,6% | 9,4% | 23,9% |
| 11-20 years | 6,9% | 24,9% | 31,1% | 21,3% | 23,7% |
| more than 20 years | 1,9% | 10,9% | 36,1% | 55,1% | 20,6% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |

Il will examine know the relations construction contexts at different stages of the life.
When peaople are less than 25, the family is still the geat part of relations and the other kinds
of ties are just emerging.


**Figure 6. Age and contexts of meeting for interviewed persons that are less than 25**
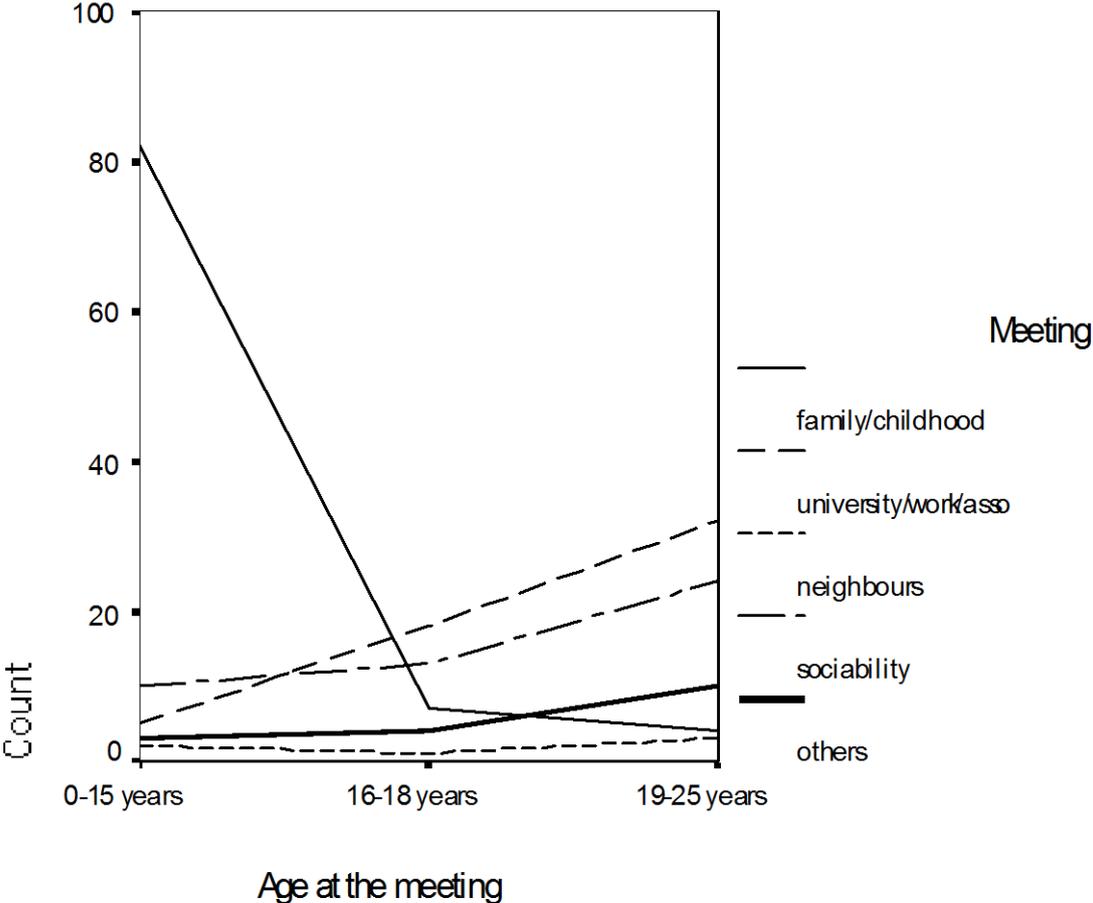


In that age group, gender, profession or education level don't matter for the meeting contexts.

In the following groups (26-45 et 46-65, grouped here because they are similair regarding the creation of relations), relations that are « constructed » are much more frequent, especially those coming from organized frameworks and those coming from sociability.

**Figure 7. Age and contexts of meeting for interviewed persons that are 26-65**
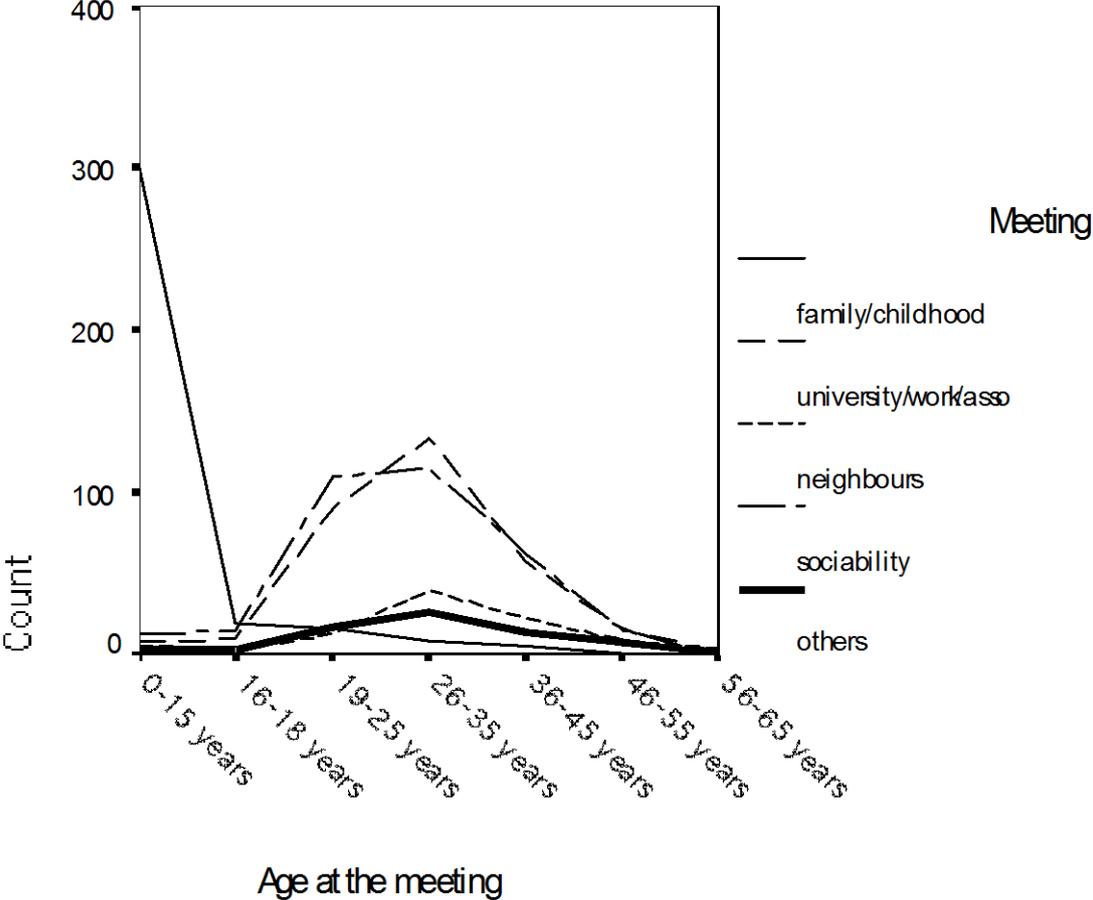
Contexts vary with profession and education level (table 4). The rate of contexts of type 2 (education, work) increases and the sociability decreases when the level of education increases. For the higher education level, the composition of the household is important. When people live alone they have more family links and less sociability links than others. People with children have more links with neighbourhood.

**Table 5. Meeting contexts and education level (26-65 years)**

| Education level<br><br>Meeting contexts | inf au bac (less than 12 years of education) | bac (12 years) | bac + 2 | bac + 4 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| family, school / childhood | 38,1% | 32,8% | 32,0% | 32,7% | 34,1% |
| éducation/work/associations | 16,2% | 24,9% | 25,3% | 36,7% | 25,8% |
| neighbours | 8,4% | 5,6% | 8,5% | 6,6% | 7,5% |
| sociability | 30,3% | 31,1% | 27,4% | 20,3% | 26,8% |
| other | 7,0% | 5,6% | 6,7% | 3,7% | 5,8% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |

For persons that are more than 65, family ties created during their life of adult (mainly their children) are more important, and so are the relations with neighbours. Links coming from organized contexts are of two kinds : ties coming from the 19-35 period (education and work) and those coming from 46-65 period (associations). Associations progressively replacework as context for creating links. Sociability is also at the origin of two kinds of relations : those of the beginning of active life (19-35) and those of the end (46-65). There are lesse links from the intermediary period bacause the relations from that period where less durable than previous ones. For that age group too, organized contexts are more important for the higher levels of education.

**Figure 8. Age and contexts of meeting for interviewed persons that are more than 65 years old**
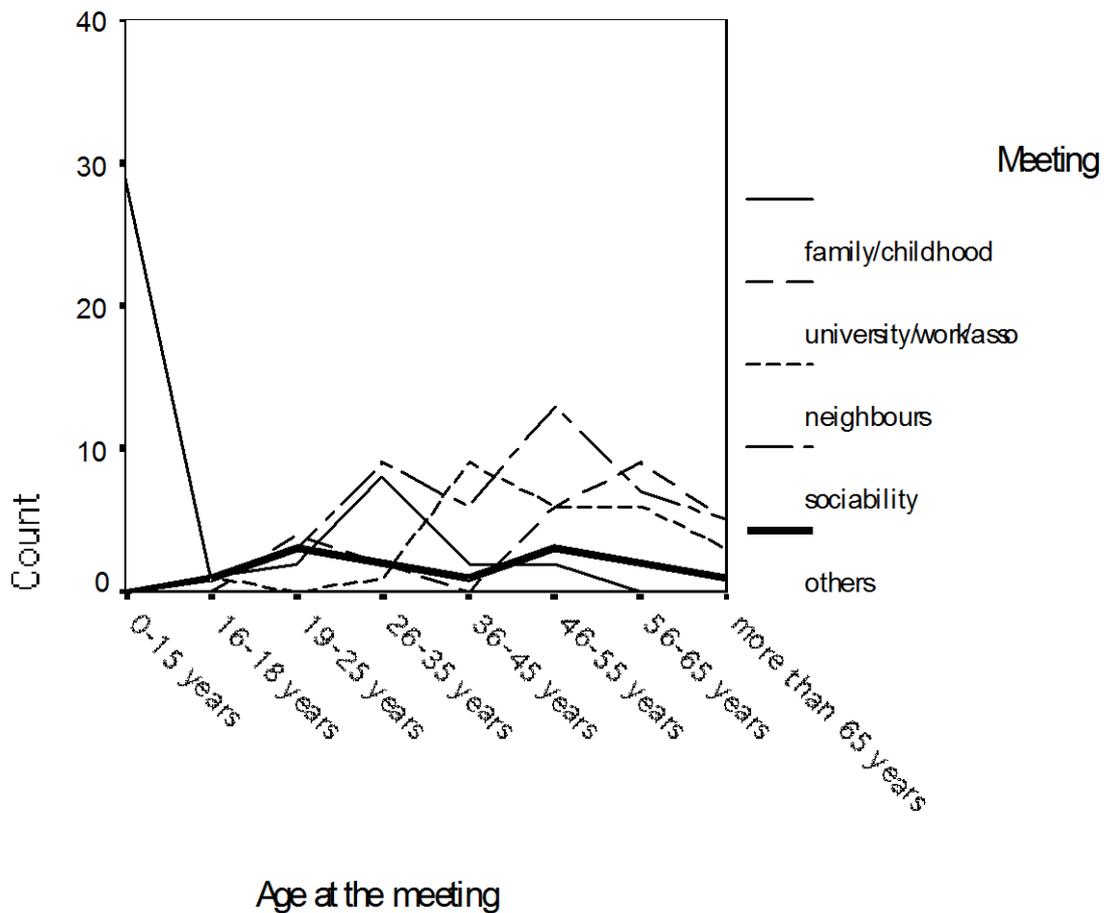


This quick journey through the ages of life show a succession of relations creation contexts. The first one is the « inheritated » family (mother, father, older brothers and sisters) and other childhood family ties (younger brothers and sisters, cousins, etc.). During adolescence come relations created within socialibity. After that, during the active life, new relations are created within educational contexts and work. It is the time of the construction of a new family (partner, children, in-laws) and strong sociability. But constructed relations are less durable than family ties and they change during the life course, depending on the different circles where persons are affiliated. Work relations are replaced by associations relations. Sociability relations are more continiously changed but their durability decreases with age. At the end persons keep relations from the very beginning and the more recent ones. With retirement, relations creation is slower and mainly done within association, socialibity and neighbourhood.

## 3. Ties evolution

Relations begin within certain contexts, get autonomous from them, get more complex, change their nature. They have an history. These data don't allow me to analyse precisely these histories but they offer some useful information. Comparing the origins of a relation and the way that people name it at the time of the survey gives an idea of the evolution of the relations.

**Table 6. Meeting contexts and descriptions of the relations**

| Description of the relation at the time of the survey<br><br>meeting context | Family | Workmate | Neighbour | Associations | Friend | Acquaintance | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| same family | 93% | 1% | 1% | 0% | 4% | 0% | 0% |
|  | 66% (92% if the relation began before 15) | 3% | 3% | 0% | 3% | 0% | 3% |
| school | 24% | 8% | 3% | 3% | 67% | 0% | 3% |
|  | 3% | 4% | 1% | 4% | 7% | 0% | 5% |
| childs together | 24% | 0% | 0% | 6% | 82% | 6% | 0% |
|  | 1% | 0% | 0% | 2% | 2% | 3% | 0% |
| university | 12% | 36% | 4% | 5% | 77% | 3% | 0% |
|  | 1% | 18% | 2% | 8% | 9% | 6% | 0% |
| at work | 13% | 44% | 3% | 3% | 69% | 1% | 2% |
|  | 4% | 61% | 4% | 14% | 22% | 9% | 11% |
| association | 21% | 3% | 4% | 27% | 69% | 8% | 1% |
|  | 3% | 2% | 3% | 49% | 9% | 22% | 3% |
| neighbour | 2% | 2% | 81% | 1% | 37% | 1% | 1% |
|  | 0% | 1% | 70% | 2% | 6% | 3% | 3% |
| by childs | 42% | 1% | 6% | 1% | 50% | 4% | 6% |
|  | 7% | 1% | 5% | 2% | 8% | 13% | 16% |
| by husband or wife | 41% | 2% | 7% | 0% | 47% | 3% | 7% |
|  | 6% | 1% | 5% | 0% | 7% | 9% | 21% |
| by a friend | 22% | 6% | 3% | 4% | 69% | 3% | 5% |
|  | 6% | 7% | 4% | 14% | 19% | 16% | 26% |
| other | 21% | 4% | 4% | 2% | 62% | 6% | 5% |
|  | 3% | 2% | 3% | 4% | 8% | 19% | 13% |
| Total | 43% | 10% | 9% | 3% | 44% | 2% | 2% |
|  | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Note : interviewed persons could cite several descriptions of a same relation but only one context meeting.

The table 6 show a lot of change between the context of meeting and the way that people name it at the time of the survey. A great part of people that were met at school, at the

university, at work, etc. have became relatives or friends. Some people met by friends began parts of the family (mainly husbands or wife). Etc.

Despite these changes, the great structures are stable. Family was present in 44% of the meeting contexts (family, by children, by husband or wife) et we find it again as a description of 43% of the relations. Work was at the origin of 10% of the relations and workmates are 10% of current descriptions. Associations decrease from 6% to 3% and all the organized contexts from 16% to 12%. Neighbours go from 8% to 9%. Friends increase up to 31% of the descriptions althrough « by friends » were only 14% of the total. We have three big blocks : family (42% of descriptions), friends and acquaintances (32%) and relations linked to an institutionnal context (27%).

A lot of relations that began in institutionnal contexts became friends or relatives. Friends and family functions like attractors for relations roles. When someone become a friend or a relative, the orginal context of the relation construction is forgotten (see table 7 for the example of work relations). It is important to notice that this kind of study doesn't allow to observe circles. We have only traces of them in the creation of relations. But during the life course, people help others to enter firms or associations and by this way they change them. People create new association or new firms. The only circle that we see here is the family.

**Table 7. Former and current « workmates »**

| Meeting context | Current description | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Work | Workmate only | 33 | 15% |
| Work | Workmate + friend | 66 | 29% |
| Work | Friend only | 82 | 36% |
| Work | Husband, wife or family | 29 | 13% |
| Work | Other | 15 | 7% |
| Total Work | | 225 | 100% |
| | | | |
| Other | Workmate only | 9 | 17% |
| Other | Workmate + friend | 44 | 83% |
| | Total workmates met out of work | 53 | 100% |

And then, one day, relations end.

## 4. End of relations

One of the innovations that I introduced on the method used by Fischer is the use of questions about « ended » relations. We asked « Are there persons who were important for you two years ago and with whom you no longer have relation ? ».

180 interviewed persons (45%) cite at least one ended relation and we have a total of 249 ended relations. The proportion decreases when people get older : 65% for the 18-25 years old, 48% for 26-45, 36% for the 46-65 and only 34% of the 65 years old cite at least one ended relation.

Why these relations came to an end ?

The most trivial reason of the end of a relation is the death of one of the partners. We have also the classic reasons : break away, distance (one of the parner leave for another town) or no explicit reason (« it's life », « I don't know »). The reasons vary with age (table 7). Younger persons loose their relations because of distance or break away. Nos surprisingly, deaths increase with age.

**Table 8. Reasons of the end of relations**

| Reason of the end Age groups | death | break away | distance | "it's life" | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-25 years | 7,3% | 36,6% | 34,1% | 22,0% | 100,0% |
| 26-45 years | 23,1% | 20,1% | 28,4% | 28,4% | 100,0% |
| 46-65 years | 31,5% | 3,7% | 25,9% | 38,9% | 100,0% |
| more than 65 years | 65,0% | | | 35,0% | 100,0% |
| Total | 64 (25,7%) | 44 (17,7%) | 66 (26,5%) | 75 (30,1%) | 100,0% |

The more ancient are the relations the less they can break away and the more the reasons are imprecise (« it's life »). The proportion of « it's life » increases with the level of education.

 As we saw it before, relations change all along the life course, with some moments of rapid recomposition during the transition between stages of life : adolescence and youth, creation of families, retirement. During these stages, the affiliations to different circles (university, work, family, association) change and this result in the changing of personal networks.

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## Conclusion

For creating a new social relation, people need to be close. In the social structures : members of common circles, having common relations. In the space of stakes : being interested in a certain same kind of things (material things, intellectual orientations, etc.). And also, for a part, in the geographical space where concrete interactions take place. But the relation decouple from its original context. Relations and networks influence a lot the evolution of circles (creation of new organization or changing of organizations on the basis of personal relations). The dynamics of personal networks is a part of a general dynamic of social structure. One of the basis of that dynamic is the interaction between networks and circles.
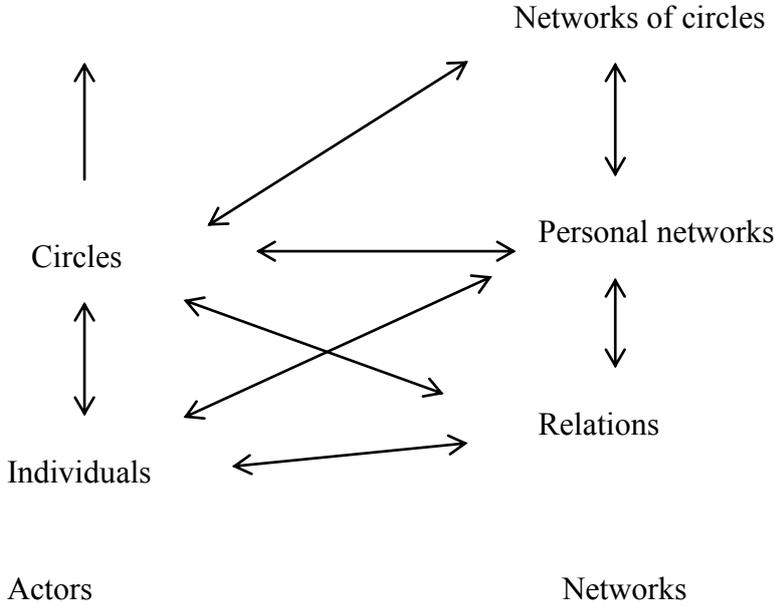


**Figure 9 : The dynamics of networks and circles**

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